THE WORLD AGEING SITUATION 1991

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Part One

THE WORLD'S AGED

I. THE DEFINITION OF "OLD"

> Hajiya Osabe spent her days in Nigeria doing many things. She gathered herbs and made her own medicines, treating women and children for various illnesses. She helped deliver infants, being knowledgeable in the skills of midwifery. She rented rooms in her compound. She sold henna, which the women use for the cosmetic staining of their feet and heads. When the deaths of women or children occurred, she was called upon to prepare the body, supervise the organization of the deceased's estate, and carry out many of the tasks associated with the burial. She traveled frequently to visit relatives and had made three trips to Mecca (during a recent ten-year period).
>
> Adapted from Catherine Coles 1/

Hajiya Asabe was 80 years old at the time she was interviewed (see box), an active and highly respected member of her community. But she is almost certainly an atypical representative of older people throughout the world. There are few young or old people like Hajiya Asabe who reach the pinnacles of social prominence in their communities.

However, it would be a serious mistake to also think that the example of Hajiya Asabe is an isolated exception. In all the countries of the world there are many older women and men who are highly active members of their communities. In fact, the evidence is clear that in most countries there are more healthy, productive, socially active older people than those who fit the common stereotypical notion of older people who are sick, passive, unproductive and serious burdens to their families and communities.

The diversity of the elderly population, like the diversity of other age groups, presents a complex reality. Issues of age, as with so many issues in other areas, confront society with, on the one hand, the challenge of potential and gain and, on the other hand, the threat of adversity and decrement. In the words of the International Plan of Action on Aging:

> "Policies to meet the challenge of a growing, healthier and more active elderly population - based on the view of the ageing of society as an opportunity to be utilized - automatically benefit the ageing persons, materially and otherwise. Similarly, any effort to ameliorate the quality of life for the elderly, and to meet their diverse social and cultural needs, enhances their capacity to continue interacting with society. In this sense, the developmental and the humanitarian aspects of the question of ageing are closely intertwined."*

A. The distinctiveness of old age

If the elderly are not necessarily sick, disabled, unproductive or socially inactive, what then is distinctive about old age? Clearly there is a

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*From the International Plan of Action on Aging, paragraph 31(f), which was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 37/51.

great deal of ambiguity related to the concept of age. 2/ A number of important points, however, are worth stating. First, with the passage of years comes the accumulation of experience. The world is constantly changing, and the boundaries of knowledge are expanding. Still, remembering and understanding what has gone before plays a key role in the decision-making of the future. In the words of George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Down through the years, older people have played key roles in accumulating and transmitting knowledge and history. The positive attributes of maturity and wisdom are usually associated with the accumulation of years.

Also associated with growing older is physiological change. Here a careful distinction must be made between cosmetic changes, i.e. changes in appearance, and functional capacity. Some people naively associate declining functional capacity with the physical characteristics of older people, such as grey hair, wrinkled skin and a slower gait. In reality, the two are not directly related, and the significant loss of functional capacity in most areas has been shown not to be an inevitable consequence of advanced years.*

While the ageing process has a genetic component responsible for some degree of physical decline, it is also influenced by environmental factors, including diet, exercise, smoking, air pollution and occupational conditions. In addition, physical decline in older people may be produced by disease as well as by ageing per se. The two should not be confused, lest it lead, for example, to a fatalistic acceptance of what are otherwise treatable conditions.

Another common mistake is to associate old age with retirement. It is possible to culturally or politically define the two as synonymous, but it should be recognized that the exceptions to this linkage overwhelm the cases supporting it in most countries. In some countries, "work until death" continues to be the norm. In these countries, the issue of retirement has two separate major aspects: withdrawing from productive activities and transferring to others control over productive resources such as land:

> "In the simpler societies (basically those of a pastoral, agricultural, or hunting/gathering nature), retirement in the sense of the transfer of control is rare. Aging invariably lessens one's ability to perform the productive tasks, leading to a measure of withdrawal, even though other important jobs still remain in the hands of the elderly." 3/

Retirement becomes more formalized and more frequent with the introduction of industrialization. Table 1 shows the extent of labour force participation in four very different Latin American countries. In all four countries, the rates are very high for households heads aged 60-64; they remain high in Colombia, Guatemala and Panama at ages 65-79 and continue to remain high in Guatemala even after age 79. In contrast, as shown in table 2, labour force participation in highly industrialized countries can be very low but in any case varies significantly.

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*This statement does not mean to ignore the fact that the incidence of certain incapacities rises with age. Rather it seeks to emphasize the lack of correlation between appearance and capacity and the very wide range of capacities among older people who are the same age.

Table 1. Labour force participation of household heads in four Latin American countries, 1986
(Percentage)

Country	Age group		
	60-64	65-79	80+
Argentina	50	16	2
Colombia	47	31	12
Guatemala	82	60	32
Panama	47	35	14

Source: Based on data in Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, The Elderly in Latin America: A Strategic Sector for Social Policy in the 1990s (Santiago, 1989), table II.1.

Table 2. Labour force participation rates for selected industrialized countries, by sex and age
(Percentage)

Country	Sex and age group			
	Males		Females	
	60-64	65+	60-64	65+
France, 1982	39	5	22	2
Australia, 1981	53	12	16	5
United States, 1982	58	18	34	8
Denmark, 1979	62	16	33	4
Canada, 1981	69	17	28	6
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1981	75	11	23	4
Japan, 1980	82	46	39	16

Source: Based on data in B. B. Torrey, K. Kinsella and C. M. Taeuber, An Aging World, International Population Reports Series P-95, No. 78 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1987), table 9.

B. Chronological age

The fact remains that chronological age, given all its limitations, continues to be widely used to delineate groups of older people. In this regard, the World Assembly on Aging adopted the population aged 60 and over as its main focus of concern. Throughout this report, therefore, the terms "the aged", "the elderly", "older people" or "old age" usually refer to the segment of the population in the 60+ group. Sometimes, however, statistical data not available for the 60+ group are reported for people aged 65 and older.

While a clear-cut demarcation beginning at age 60 is convenient for statistical analysis, it must be stressed again that old age is a very relative concept. Ageing begins at birth or, from a biomedical point of view, even earlier, and is a process of continuing physiological, psychological and social change throughout the life span, with great variation occurring among individuals.

II. GROWING NUMBERS OF OLDER PEOPLE*

The ageing of populations is now a global phenomenon: it is manifest in several parts of the world and incipient in all the rest. In demographic terms, a population is said to be ageing when the share of people in the older age group increases and the share of children and youth decreases, resulting in an ascending median age. In 1950, there were 200 million persons aged 60 and over in the world, constituting 8 per cent of the total global population. By 2025, there will be a sixfold increase in this number: the world elderly population is projected to be 1.2 billion people, about 14 per cent of the total (figures I and II). The median age of the world population will jump from 23.4 years in 1950 to 31.1 years in 2025 (figure III).

A. Regional demographic shifts

Populations age in two ways: as a result of changes at the base of the age pyramid or changes at its apex. When the proportion of older persons increases as a result of a decline in fertility, there is a commensurate decrease in the proportion of young persons; this is ageing at the base of the age pyramid. Changes at the apex of the pyramid, on the other hand, happen as a result of improved mortality among older persons. Thus, a demographic transition begins when there is a secular change from a regime of high fertility and mortality to one of low fertility and mortality.

Allowing for differences in space and time, the fact of the demographic transition seems inevitable. The population dynamics of different countries and regions have their own idiosyncratic characteristics. But all their age structures have been following, and are projected to follow, the course of the demographic transition. Thus, in the developed regions of the world, the transition has already taken place.** They have reached very low levels of fertility and mortality. Their populations are considerably older than those in other parts of the world and are projected to become even older. Of the developing regions, many countries in Asia and Latin America are now in the midst of the demographic transition. In the 1950s and 1960s, the age structures of a majority of these countries became younger. Then, in the early 1970s, a substantial fertility decline reversed the trend. Since then,

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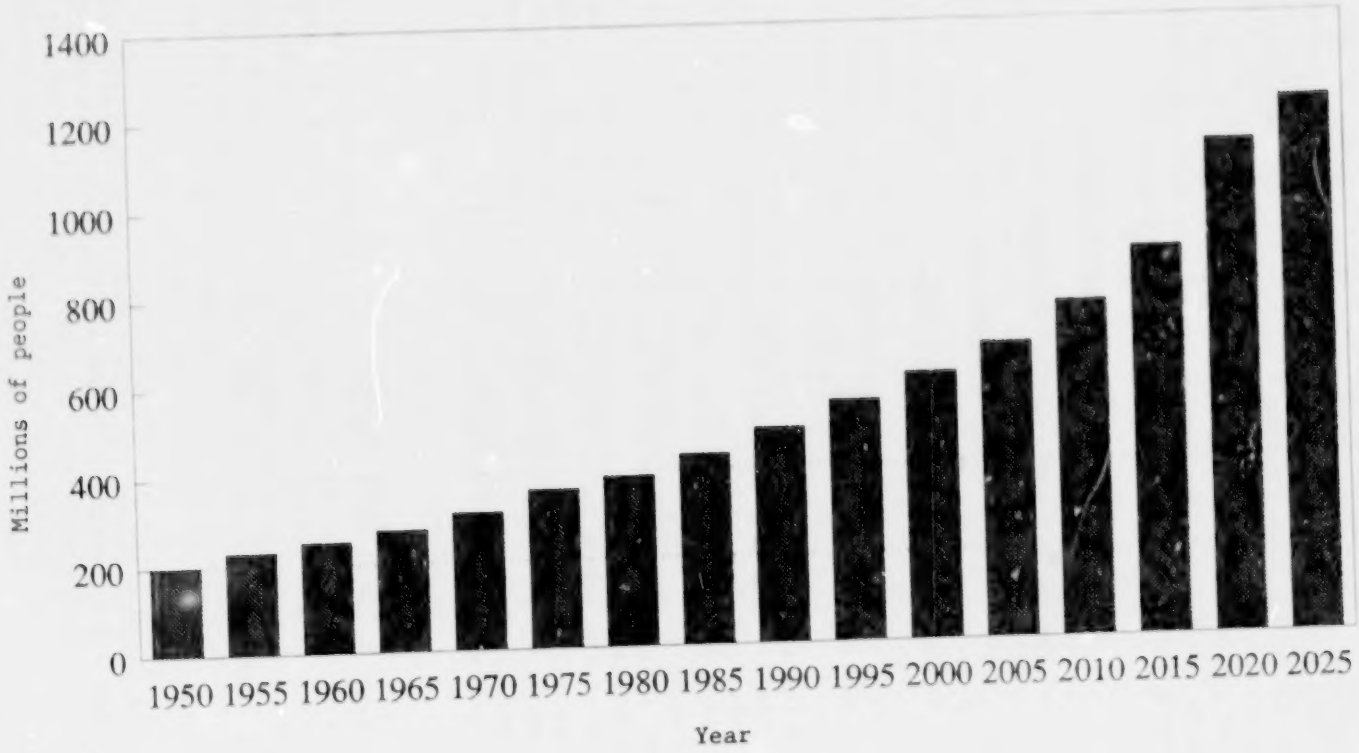
*This chapter is an updated and slightly revised version of the demographic discussion in "Social development: second review and appraisal of the implementation of the International Plan of Action on Aging: report of the Secretary-General" (E/1989/13). Demographic data, except where indicated, are from World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7). All demographic data in the present report are based on the medium variant statistics provided in that report.

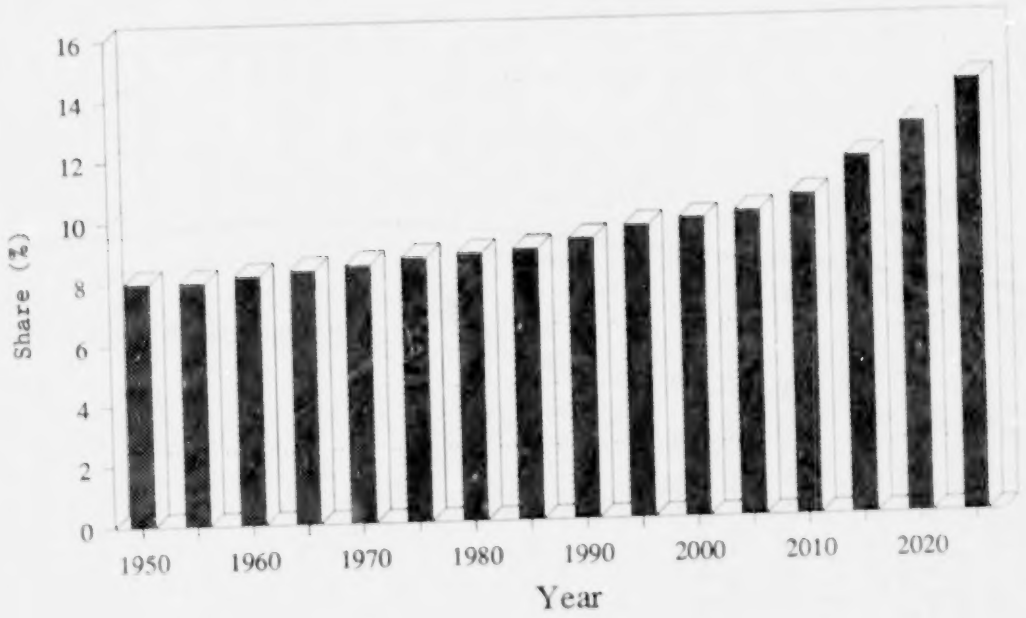
**The data in figures III-VI are taken from World Population Prospects 1988, which groups its information on the basis of "more developed" and "less developed" regions, defining them as follows: more developed regions comprise North America, Japan, all regions of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Less developed regions comprise all regions of Africa, all regions of Latin America, all regions of Asia (except Japan), Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. More commonly, however, these regions are spoken of as developed and developing, and this latter terminology is retained in the text.

Figure I. World population aged 60 and over, 1950-2025



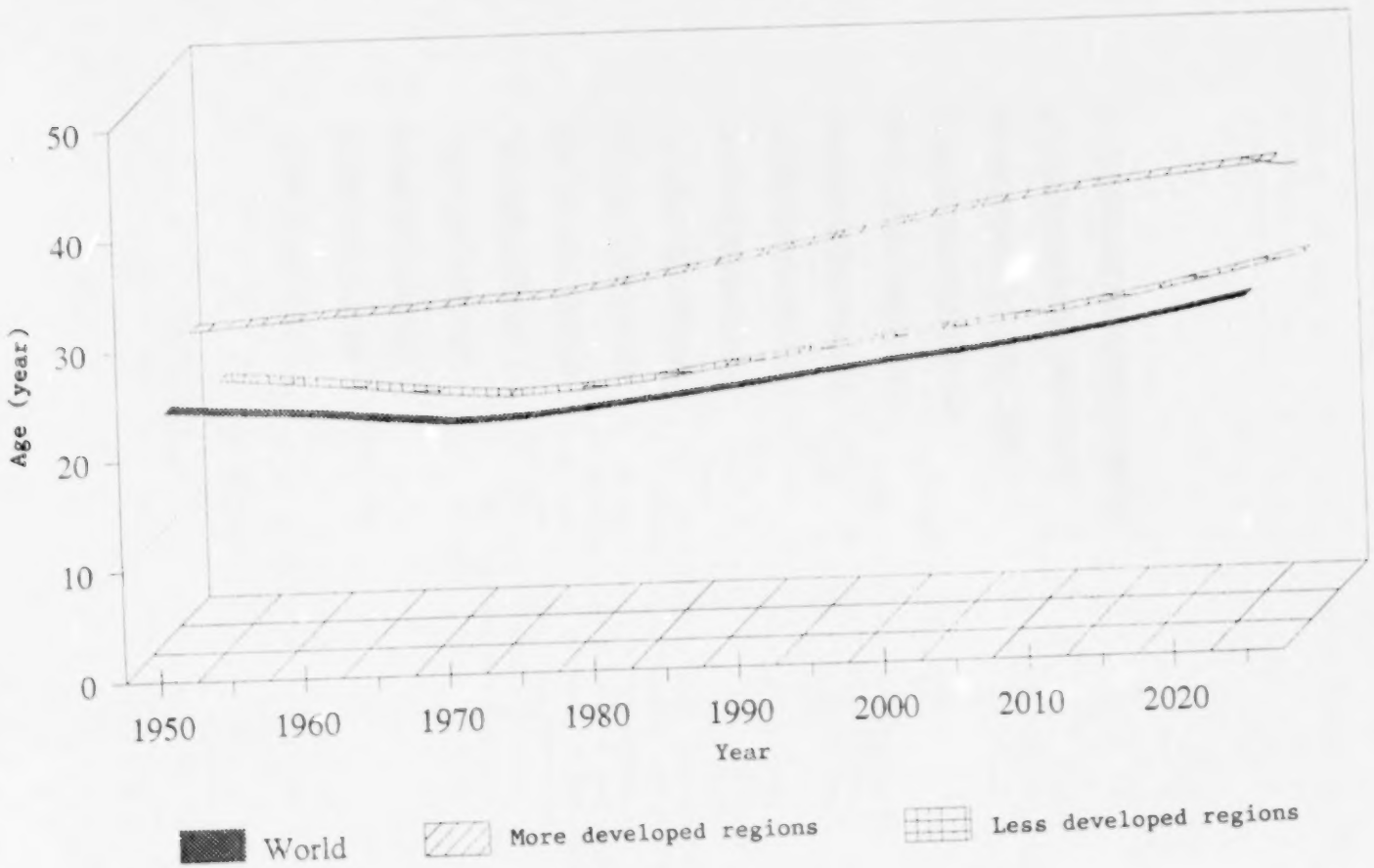
Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

Figure II. Share of world population aged 60 and over, 1950-2025



Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

Figure III. Median age of the world population, 1950-2025



Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

these populations have been ageing rapidly, and the trend is projected to become stronger. In sub-Saharan Africa, most countries are still in the early stages of the demographic transition. Here, too, the pattern will be replicated, but it will come later. By the second decade of the next century, population ageing will be a significant problem.

In 1950, there were about 200 million people above 60 years of age in the world, evenly distributed between developed and developing regions. By 1975, there were about 350 million elderly people, with a similar distribution. Projections indicate a definite change in the pattern by the year 2000. The total world elderly population will then be 614 million, and the proportion living in developing regions will be over 62 per cent. In 2025, the absolute number of the elderly will double, to 1.2 billion. A majority of them, 72 per cent of the total, will be living in developing regions (figure IV). Thus, in the 75 years between 1950 and 2025, the elderly population of the world is projected to grow by a factor of 6, which is double that for the total world population, which will have grown by a factor of little more than 3. Within this broad demographic picture, four trends should be noted, each of which has major policy implications. Each is discussed below.

B. The regional distribution of the world's elderly

There is a growing tendency for the world's elderly to be concentrated in developing countries. This population was evenly distributed between developing and developed regions from 1950 to 1975. By 2025, as indicated above, 72 per cent of the elderly, about 858 million people, will be living in developing regions (figure V). Disaggregrating these data into regional distributions reveals the trend more clearly. If 1985 and 2025 are taken as the reference years and the proportions of the total elderly population in different regions are considered, it is found that Asia had 48 per cent of the total in 1985 and will have 58 per cent in 2025. Comparable figures for other regions are as follows: Europe, 20 per cent to 12 per cent; North America, 10 per cent to 7 per cent; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 9 per cent to 6 per cent; Latin America, 6 per cent to 8 per cent; and Africa, 6 per cent to 9 per cent. Oceania stays at less than 1 per cent. Thus, the developed regions will have a smaller share of the world's elderly (there will be declines in Europe, North America and the USSR). The developing regions, by contrast, will have a larger share of the world's elderly (there will be increases in Asia, Latin America and Africa).

C. The global dependency ratio

One of the economic concerns raised by population ageing is that the numbers of people in the work force may decline in proportion to non-workers, mainly children and the elderly, who consume but do not produce economic output. Dependency ratios are a crude but useful non-economic indicator of this situation.* These ratios aggregate both young and older dependants and express the total as a ratio of the working population. This total dependency ratio can be disaggregated into its "child" and "aged" components. Figure VI shows global trends for the period between 1950 and 2025. In 1950, the world-wide youth dependency ratio (the population aged 0-14 divided by the

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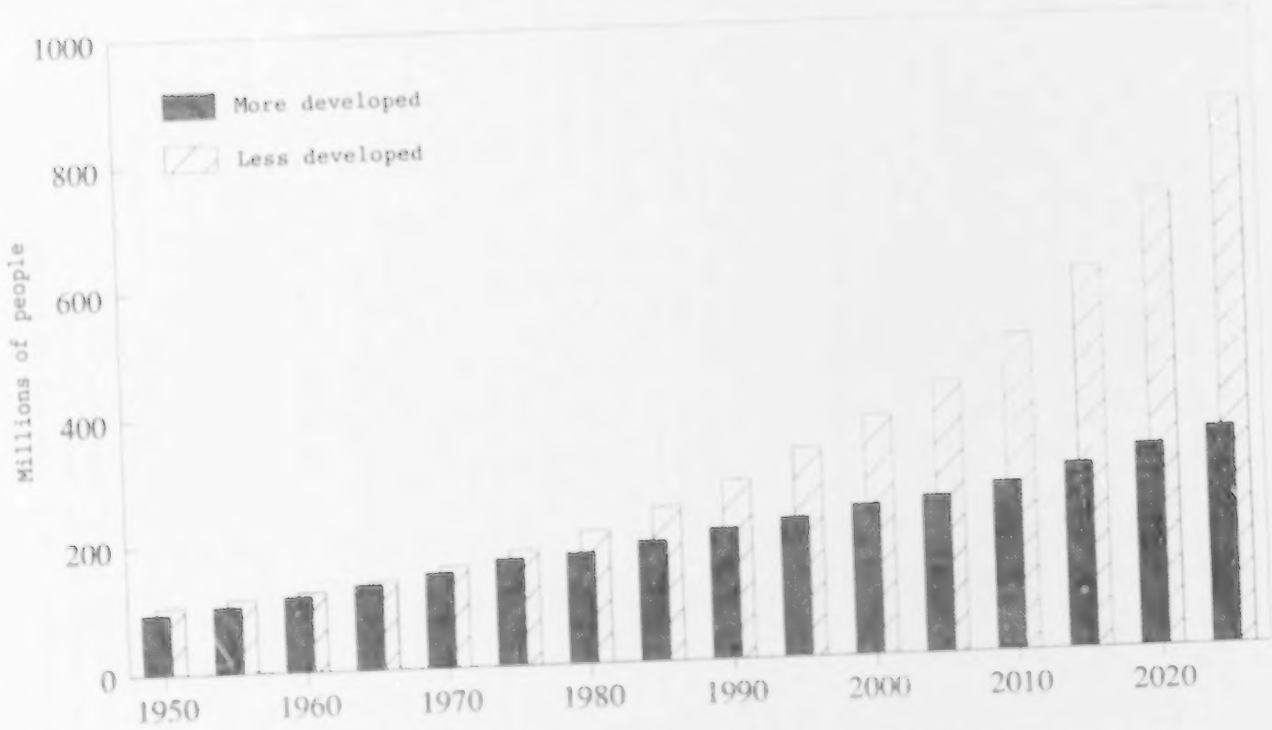
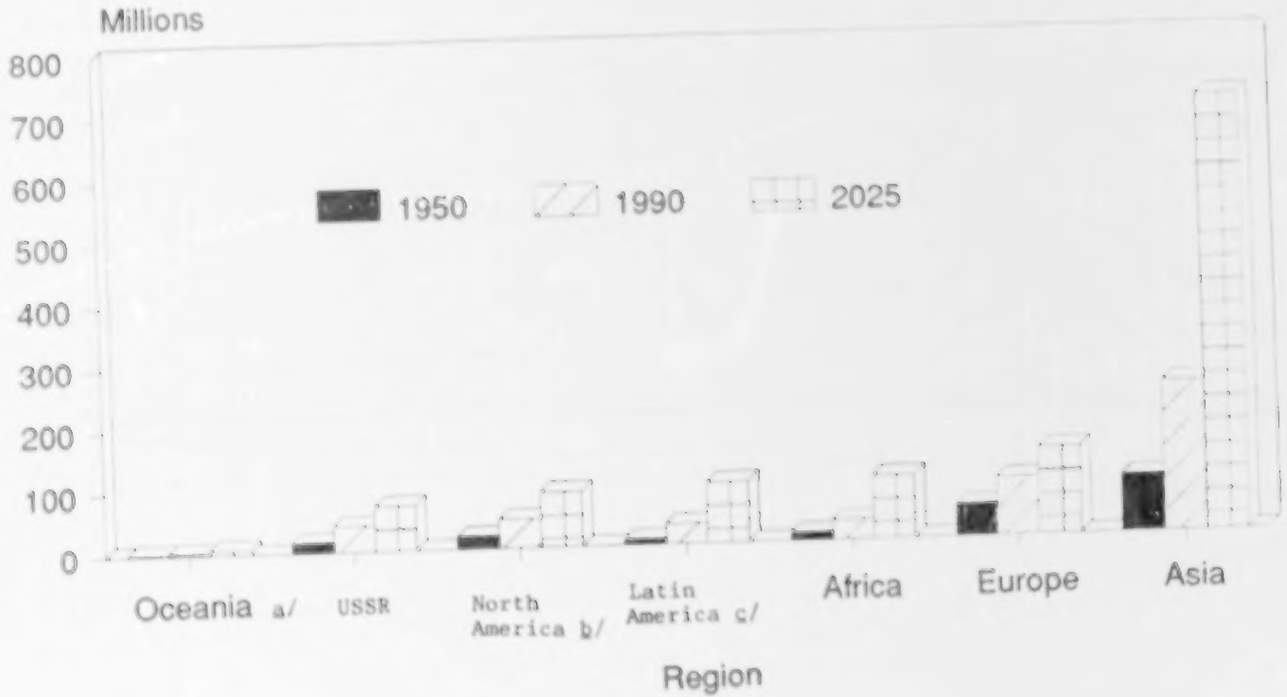
*The dependency ratio concept, its measurement and its limitations are discussed in more detail in part two, chapter I.

Figure IV. Population aged 60 and over: more developed and less developed regions, 1950-2025



Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

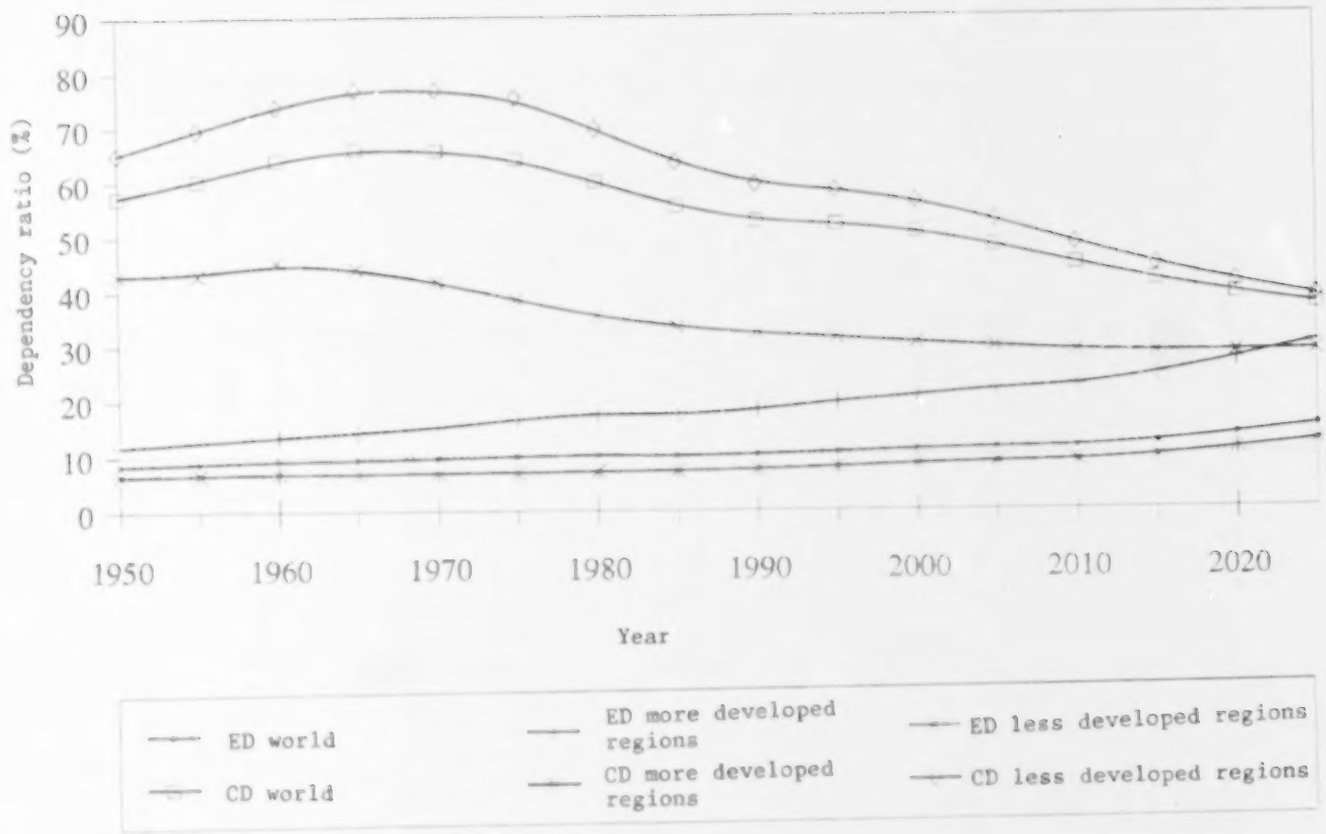
Figure V. Regional distribution of population aged 60 and over, 1950, 1990 and 2025



Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

a/ Australia, New Zealand, Melanesia, Macronesia and Polynesia.
b/ Including Bermuda, Greenland, St. Pierre and Miquelon.
c/ Including the Caribbean.
d/ Excluding the USSR.

Figure VI. Dependency ratios: world, more developed and less developed regions, 1950-2025



Note: Elderly dependency (ED): 65+/15-64
Child dependency (CD): 0-14/15-64

Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

population aged 15 to 64, expressed as a percentage) was 57 per cent; by the year 2025, this will decline to 37 per cent. The aged dependency ratio (the population aged 65 or more divided by the population aged 15 to 64, also expressed as a percentage), by contrast, was 8 per cent for the world in 1950; it will increase by the year 2025 to 15 per cent. The net result of these two opposite trends is a total dependency ratio that declines from 66 per cent in 1950 to 52 per cent in 2025.

Further disaggregation of these global data helps to explain this changing ratio. In 1950, the youth dependency ratio was 43 per cent for the developed regions and 65 per cent for the developing regions. By 2025, both of these ratios will decline, to 28 and 39 per cent, respectively. Aged dependency ratios, on the other hand, will increase. In 1950, they were 12 per cent for the developed regions and 7 per cent for the developing ones; they will increase in 2025 to 30 and 12 per cent, respectively. The net result is a small rise in the total dependency ratio for developed regions, from 55 per cent to 58 per cent, and a big decline in the total dependency ratio for developing ones, from 72 per cent to 51 per cent.

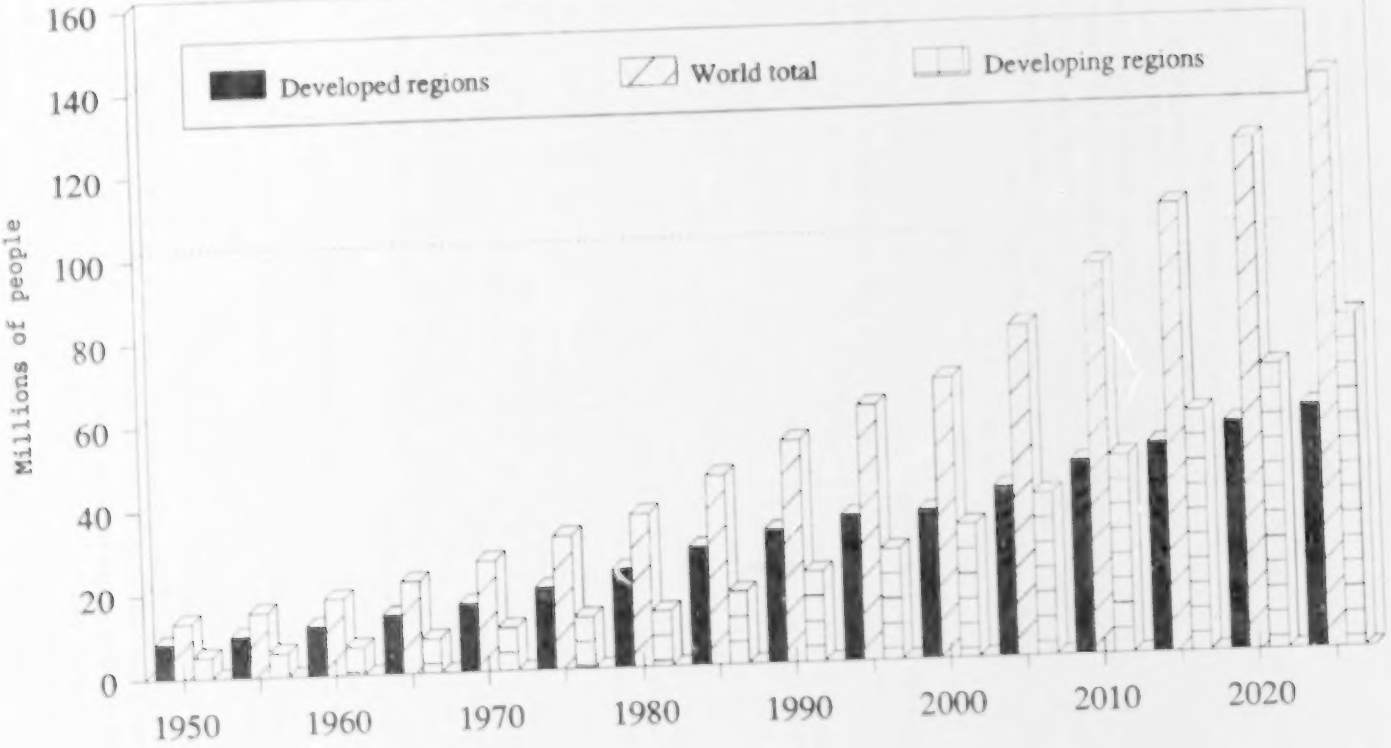
D. The very old

Considering the population aged 60 and above as a monolithic group conceals two important factors: the age and gender distribution within the group. Figure VII shows the numbers of very old people, defined as those who are 80 years and above. In 1950, there were 13 million very old in the world, constituting 7 per cent of the total elderly population. In 1985, the number of very old had more than tripled, to 45 million. That accounted for 10 per cent of the total elderly population, which only doubled during the same period. By 2025, the very old will number about 137 million, 11 per cent of the total elderly. Thus, the elderly population will have grown by a factor of 6 between 1950 and 2025 and the very old, by a factor of 10. Growth rates of the 80+ age group will be more rapid in developing regions. In 1950, there were only 15 million very old in these regions; by 2025, there will be about 79 million. This amounts to growth by a factor of 15, compared to growth by a factor of 8 for the elderly population as a whole. In the developed regions, too, numbers of the very old will increase, from 8 million in 1950 to about 58 million by 2025. This amounts to growth by a factor of 7, compared to growth by a factor of 3.5 for the elderly population as a whole. Thus, in both developed and developing regions, the 80+ age group will grow twice as fast as the 60+ age group.

E. Differences by sex

It is well known that in most countries females are much more likely to survive to older ages than males. A good indicator of this phenomenon is the sex ratio, which is defined as the number of males to every 100 females. Given the age patterns, growth of the elderly population implies a decrease in the sex ratio for the total population and a greater increase in the number of older women than of older men. Between 1985 and 2025, projected increases for persons aged 70 and above are 32 million for males and 38 million for females in the developed regions and 284 million for males and 317 million for females in the developing regions. Sex differences in absolute increments are more apparent at older ages. Thus, over the same period, projected increases in the number of persons aged 80 and above are 8 million for males and 14 million for females in the developed regions and 24 million for males and 35 million for females in the developing regions.

Figure VII. Population aged 80 and over: world, more developed and less developed regions, 1950-2025



Source: World Population Prospects 1988 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.88.XIII.7).

F. Implications of demographic shift

The major implications of the demographic changes now occurring are clear.* First, it is important to recognize that the ageing of populations is inevitable. Secondly, the projections indicate that the demographic transition will proceed much more rapidly in developing regions than it did previously in developed ones. The recent, and continuing, fertility decline in many developing countries today is faster than the gradual decline experienced by the currently developed countries. In the developing countries, therefore, the pace of population ageing will exceed the pace in the developed countries in the past.

The conclusion is inescapable: the populations of developing countries will age, will involve larger absolute numbers and will age more rapidly than the populations of developed countries. Ageing is usually regarded as a problem that is confined to the developed countries. It is clear that in the future this will not be true. Ageing is now a global problem, affecting developing countries as well. The central policy implication, therefore, is that developing regions of the world will have to plan for the increasingly rapid ageing of their populations.

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*An increasingly important phenomenon not discussed in this section is the migration of large numbers of the elderly seeking better or more appropriate living conditions. In developing countries, these changes are often forced on older people by changing climatic conditions, wars, the impact of urbanization on rural/village life etc. In developed countries, increasing numbers of older people retire to new areas, attracted by conditions conducive to the post-work years. Both developments are discussed briefly in part three.